The Old Santa Cruz Stage Road
by Helen Jarret

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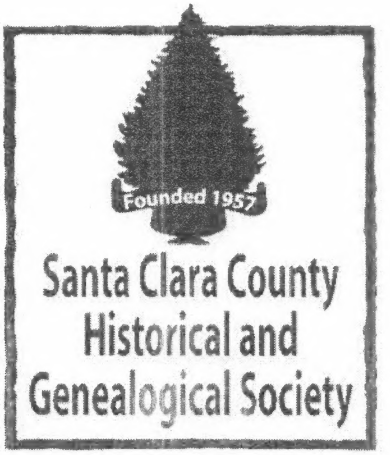
Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



Federal Writers' Projects
District 9
Helen Jarret

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CLASS II HISTORICAL

THE OLD SANTA CRUZ STAGE ROAD

It was not because he had shot so many buffalos that Zachariah Jones was known as "Buffalo" Jones--it was because he looked like a buffalo and roared like a buffalo when he spoke.

Jones' name has become a legend in the last ninety years in the Santa Clara Valley.

He was one of the first squatters in the region, but he never had the name of a settler, as did Mountain Charley McKiernan.

It is generally believed that Jones was here when Fremont came in February, 1846. Jones was not educated,- and left no record.

Just where Fremont stopped is not known. A certain large oak at Alma (on Los Gatos Santa Cruz Road) claims the honor of providing shade for Fremont's party, but a grassy flat nearby named "Idlewild", disputes this claim.

It was in "Idlewild", twenty years later that Louis Hebard, who came to Alma in 1857, found a rusty spur and remains of a saddle beneath huge madrone, relics that he kept as mementos of the Fremont expedition.

Fremont resuming his work of the expedition, on the 22nd of February states: "we encamped on the Wild-Cat Ridge on the road to Santa Cruz and again on the 23rd near the summit. The character of the woods, the shrubbery of the mountain, which lay between my camp and the Santa Cruz

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shore, was very interesting: I wished to spend some days there, as spring was now renewing vegetation, and the accounts of the big trees in the forests aroused my curiosity--Always, too, I was looking for a charming spot to build my home, nature had been so generous to this part of the valley it was hard to decide.

"The soft climate and lovely spots in center of pines in San Jose were enticing, but I wanted to be near the waves of the Pacific.

" We encamped two thousand feet above the sea, the ground was covered with grass a foot high.

" At sunrise the temperature was 40 degrees; at noon 60; at four in the afternoon, 65 degrees, and 63 degrees at sunset.

" Among the many cypress trees we measured--we found the diameter nine or ten feet, sometimes eleven feet, and one was fourteen feet in diameter. About two-hundred feet was the natural height. In this locality the bark was unusually thick and deeply furrowed, being sixteen inches on some trees. It was in bloom, flowering near the top, therefore they were difficult to pick."

This is the staple timber-tree of the county, being cut into both boards and shingles, ~~this~~ and is the principal timber sawed at the mills. It is soft, and easily worked--it cannot be used for floors; but it has the durability

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which years before made this tree (cypress) famous. Posts that had been weathered for three quarters of a century, (since the opening of the missions) showed no mark of decay. They are now (1934) made into posts and beams for private homes. In California this tree is called the "Palo Colorado" redwood. (Note: Fremont confused the Sequois Sempervirens of the coast with the Sequoia Gigantea of the Sierra, and both with a variety of cypress, a separate species of tree).

"Among the oaks in this mountain is a handsome, lofty evergreen tree, in general appearance it resembles the hickory. The bark is smooth, white in color, the wood hard and close-grained; they are nearly four feet in diameter and 100 feet high. Another remarkable tree of these woods is the "madrona". It is a beautiful evergreen with large thick leaves; the trunk and branches are reddish in color, and have a smooth and naked appearance--as if the bark had been stripped off. In its green state the wood is brittle, very hard and close-grained; it has a color of red when dry, sometimes changeable and susceptible to a high polish. Some measured nearly four feet in diameter and were about 60 feet high".

This was the beautiful scene that greeted Buffalo Jones, and he did much to destroy it, as he made his living out of fence posts, and shingles, and tan bark and cordwood.

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Where he came from, and where he went when the place became crowded with a few people, is a mystery. He lived with C. C. Martin at his Glenwood ranch, after Martin had built him a small sawmill in 1852-53, where the San Jose Water works dam now crosses Los Gatos creek above Alma.

Jones never bothered to take up a homestead, simply squatted, and claimed he owned all the redwoods in sight.

After spending a few years with the Martins, he pulled up stakes and moved on; he was never heard of again.

Jones told Martin and many others, he had come in 1846 over a bear trail from the valley--over the same trail he later packed lumber and supplies for his shanty.

This "bear trail" was the Santa Cruz branch of the El Camino Real. First it was used by the Olhones Indians for at least three centuries, later by the padres in traveling from mission to mission.

Swerving up over St. Joseph's hill of today, (1934) where the Sacred Heart novitiate lies, directly southeast of Los Gatos, the trail went down the south side of Jones' hill into the Lyndon gulch, emerging just above the junction of the gulch with Los Gatos creek, two miles from Los Gatos on the Santa Cruz highway.

Steep, rough, and in the summer time wonderful for its dust, the trail in the winter was dangerous for pack trains and men alike. Portions of the old route ~~is~~ are still in

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occasional use. (1934)

First the bull-teams, then the stage-coach with iron-shod wheels converted this trail into parallet ruts that gave adventurous travelers a hair-raising ride.

But Jones' road, the only pass through the mountains and over the ridge, was so steep that only half-loads could be carried on each trip.

Mrs. Fremont Older in 1925, states that this pass was named for Mrs. Farnham, the first woman to cross the Santa Cruz mountains in a wheeled vehicle.

A new road was first made on May 5, 1852 when Joseph Johnson and Peter Davidson piloted the first wagon over the new route. The first winter after the road was built the rains washed it away.

In 1865 the San Jose Weekly gave an account of what was a more or less commonplace happening on the stage road:

"The stage for Santa Cruz, on Thursday last, containing eight or nine passengers, upset about a mile beyond Mountain Charleys', and rolled down a gulch about 150 feet. The passengers tumbled out, and no one was seriously injured. The accident was caused by wild hogs jumping among the horses while making a sharp curve."

The case of Charley Parkhurst, the most hell-roaring stage driver of the day, forms a strange saga of western life.

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Little was known of Charley's life, until he became one of the most famous drivers on the San Jose-Santa Cruz run, about 1868.

Kicked in the face by one of his lead horses, Parkhurst lost one eye, which he kept covered with a black patch. He was far from handsome. This patch, with lips and chin stained by tobacco juice, and a truculent expression made Charley the toughest looking fellow in the region. His swearing was outstanding, even among such gifted men as teamsters. His eye was cold and unfriendly. Charley was a swaggering bully, and not until after his death did they find out he--was a woman!

Fifty years before women's suffrage, she voted, her name appearing on the Santa Cruz register in 1866.

"Charley" was born Charlotte Parkhurst in 1828 in Ohio. She came to California in 1848.

"Charley" dressed as a typical driver, wore a muffler, gauntlets, heavy coat, and cap of buffalo skin. "He" turned up the cuffs of his blue jeans nine inches to show off his elegant boots.

Bibliography:

San Jose Mercury Herald, May 27, 1934 Volume 125